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# Tape Hiss: Joseph Nechvatal & The History Of Tellus Audio Cassette Magazine

—*Robert Barry , October 30th, 2021 09:40*

For over forty years, Joseph Nechvatal has been making art out of noise. He talks to Robert Barry about viral symphonies, cassette magazines, and art squats

*Joseph Nechvatal in 1983 at his art show at Brooke Alexander Gallery, NYC, photo by Peter Bellamy*

The first time Joseph Nechvatal infected sound with a virus it was just a "little tiny two-second snippet" – a single *plip* (with no corresponding *plop*) of a raindrop coming to land. A pitter without a patter. From that isolated atom of sound, a symphony grew. "The algorithmic sequence starts generating noise," Nechvatal explains, "and from there, you can capture and sort of massage it into different levels of sophistication." The full work – ninety-nine minutes long with C++ programming by Stephane Sikora and orchestration for voice, strings, piano, percussion, woodwind, brass, and didgeridoo by Kevin Harkins – was performed for the first time at Diapason in Brooklyn in February 2009 and broadcast online the following year for the W2F Festival. Viruses – or at least, a virtual computer modelling of the way viruses function – have been "a tool in [Nechvatal's] paintbox" ever since. But right now, after a year-and-a-half of lockdowns and constant pandemia, I get the feeling he's had about as much of viruses as he can take. "I'm sort of fed up with it," he says. "Aren't you?"

Over the last half-century, Nechvatal's Zelig-like career in the arts has taken him from working as La Monte Young's archivist and squatting in Laurie Anderson's building in Lower Manhattan to the Documenta festival in Kassel and the Lascaux Caves deep in the Dordogne. He's worked with Jenny Holzer and Rhys Chatham, studied with Roy Ascott and Arthur Danto, and published his own work in almost every conceivable medium. In 1983, he founded Tellus, an audio magazine for the sonic arts, produced on cassette, and featuring, over its decade-long run, contributions from Sonic Youth, Glenn Branca, Wharton Tiers, Julius Eastman, Ellen Fullman, Christian Marclay, Woody Vasulka, Alison Knowles, and many, many more. In later years, he became a pioneer of virtual reality and artificial life, making work for concert halls, poetry imprints, and art galleries inspired by the likes of Antonin Artaud and Virginia Woolf.

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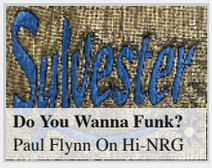


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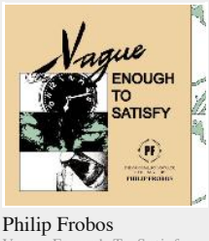


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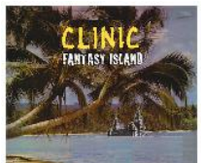


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We spoke on the phone from his home in France about cassettes as a medium, having La Monte Young as a boss, and Nechvatal's career-spanning new tape compilation for Chicago's Pentiments Records, *Selected Sound Works (1981–2021)*.

"I should probably give you a little bit of background on that because it kind of came out of nowhere," Nechvatal explains. "I prepared another piece of new audio art based on Antonin Artaud's radio play and it was broadcast on the radio in New York, and the publisher of the cassette, he's also going to publish a double LP, and he heard it and he wrote me out of nowhere. Originally we were thinking of vinyl for the *Selected Sound Works*, but he realised that some copyright issues may emerge, for example in the piece where I – well, what's the nice way to say it? – *fuck with* Janet Jackson's music. He said that might draw red flags when it came to the pressing of the vinyl…"

Joseph Nechvatal has been fucking with sound since he was a kid. He played in bands at school, on drums and guitar and for a while "sort of fiddled with the idea of being a professional rock musician" before he took a swerve towards visual art. But he's always been drawn to the transgressive power of noise. "It's disruptive," he says, "and slightly anti-social. It gives the listener a larger role in the participation of the piece. They are required to sort of give of themselves a little bit, first of all to stand it…"

*Joseph Nechvatal photo by Seton Smith 1981*

Born in Chicago in 1951, Nechvatal finished his Masters degree at Cornell in 1974 then, the following year, he landed his "dream job" and moved to the Tribeca district of New York. "I got this job as La Monte Young's archivist when Dia Art Foundation was just beginning. So I all of a sudden was immersed in this fusion world of visual artists that were also making sound work. I had Flux Boxes by Yoko Ono under my hands. I had to sort through them, describe them, type it all up, put it in archival protective materials. I wrote a catalogue of La Monte's collection. Mostly Fluxus work, but then also sound recordings and other things. That put me right in the sweet spot between all of the disciplines."

How, I ask, was Young to work for?

"He was the best possible boss you could have hoped for. Again, I was in my late twenties, I lived nearby. He said, come when you want, here's the project, here's what you're gonna get paid, any hours you wanna come day or night, you come and you log in, you do the work. He was fantastic and he is a fantastic person.

"Yeah," he continues with a slight wry laugh, "a lot of people have funny ideas about him because of his reluctance to release his music into the world without being, you know, well, I won't go into the whole story…" Criticism of Young's notorious hoarding of his own tape archives has come, in particular, from his former collaborator in the Theatre of Eternal Music, Tony Conrad, who at one

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time took to picketing Young's concerts with a sign saying, 'Composer La Monte Young does not understand 'his' work'. In June 2021, reams of Young recordings suddenly turned up on Bandcamp, available to buy as digital downloads. So now you, too, can purchase an mp3 of the Well-Tuned Piano, all six hours and twenty-five minutes of it, for just forty-nine US dollars.

Young and his wife Marian Zazeela were amongst the first cohort of artists supported by the Dia Art Foundation after it was established by German art dealer, Heiner Friedrich with Helen Winkler and Philippa de Menil in 1974. But with the oil crisis of the early 80s taking a chunk out of Texan heiress de Menil's fortune, Dia was forced to scale back its operations – even Donald Judd's major Chinati Foundation in Marfa got delayed. "That was sort of the end," Nechvatal recalls. "At that point, there was some loss of funding. It was time to move on. But it was great. No problem whatsoever. And I was starting to have my solo exhibitions, first in non-profit spaces, but then in commercial galleries, so the timing was quite good, actually."

*Joseph Nechvatal (1981) photo by Tom Warren from his Photo Portfolio Colab Artists Portraits series taken at ABC No Rio (1981-1984)*

Back when he first moved to New York, Nechvatal had ended up at a bit of a loose end. "At one point, I found myself without a place to live," he says, "so I was squatting an abandoned methadone centre, that was actually in Laurie Anderson's building on Canal Street. It was an abandoned thing and I just needed a place to crash. So I was staying there and I did a little exhibition there. Actually, my first show in New York! And I invited some people I knew and they invited their friends. And most of those people happened to be Colab, which was just kind of growing at that time."

Founded in 1977, Collaborative Projects (or 'Colab') was an artists' collective featuring the likes of Judy Rifka, John Ahearn, Diego Cortez, Jane Dickson, and Jenny Holzer. In January 1980, they put on an exhibition called The Real Estate Show in a squatted building on Delancey Street that ended, less than a week later, in a tense stand-off with the police and city authorities. It was around this time that Nechvatal first encountered the group and there is a famous photograph of him, alongside Joseph Beuys and other artists, standing outside the building, protesting the fact they had been locked out of their own show.

After the debacle of The Real Estate Show, Nechvatal moved with other Colab members to the East Village. They founded the cultural centre, ABC No Rio at 156 Rivington Street (later the home for a long-running series of hardcore punk matinee shows), where Nechvatal "ran a sort of out of hours audio art club". Sound was playing an increasingly prominent part in Nechvatal's practice at the time following an invitation that came just as ABC No Rio was getting started.

Photographer Barbara Ess had started *Just Another Asshole* in 1978 as a photocopied zine. At the time, Ess was playing bass and ukulele in no wave bands like Y-Pants, Disband, and the Static (with Glenn Branca). Just Another Asshole provided an outlet for her visual artwork, as well as contributions from others via open submission. In 1979, a special glossy tabloid edition of the zine was produced including contributions from Kim Gordon, Dan Graham, and Jeff Koons. A benefit show for the magazine was hosted by Colab at the Mudd Club with live music by The Static and Disband plus films by Bruce Connor and others. Two years later, *Just Another Asshole #5* wasn't a printed magazine at all, but a vinyl record. At seven-seven minutes in length, with contributions from some eighty-four different artists (including Dara Birnbaum, Lynne Tillman, Annea Lockwood, Eric Bogosian…), *Just Another Asshole: The Lp* today stands as a seminal document of the artistic cross-fertilisation characteristic of New York's febrile downtown scene at the turn of the 1980s.

"They just said, hey, everybody," recalls Nechvatal of the curation process, "just send us a short piece, and we're going to assemble, unfussed-with, raw, whatever we receive from you. We trust you to give us whatever you think will be appropriate. And that's what we did." Nechvatal's contribution, just forty-seven seconds in length, flits manically between speech samples from old films and radio ads and a delirious performance by Nechvatal himself on a Tibetan *gyaling* flute. There was never a second *Just Another Asshole* compilation. Issue six became a book, and seven, co-edited with Branca, went back to magazine format. But for Nechvatal, the record provided "a key model for Tellus," the audio magazine he founded in 1983.

*Joseph Nechvatal 2021 photo by Tommaso Casini*

Lou Ottens introduced the world to the compact cassette in 1963, but it was only with the invention of Sony's portable 'Walkman' player in 1979 that the format found its true calling. It was precisely "the portability of it" that attracted Nechvatal to the cassette format. "Of course I had a boombox and a walkman, immediately after they came out," he tells me. "It was really what was happening. People were carrying boomboxes around in New York outside at the time and you could just slip a tape into your walkman, put on your headphones and walk across the Brooklyn Bridge with some different soundtrack and it all of a sudden opened up the city to all kinds of sonic flavours and interpretations. I found that exhilarating. It had a feeling of freedom about it."

In 1983, when Nechvatal founded Tellus, the cassette tape was already well on the way to overtaking vinyl records and becoming the dominant format for recorded music. But even as it was finding favour with the commercial music industry at large, a thriving cassette underground was growing up in the interstices of the new independent music scene as underground bands and outsider musicians embraced the format's low cost and ease of use. "I wanted to incorporate cassettes into Mail Art," Nechvatal says. "The idea was we would just send something to usually a colleague or a friend or someone you wanted to exchange work with. It was just the beginning of the cassette underground culture, where people were doing similar things. Because you could not only play cassettes, you could record on the boombox and on the Walkman, so you had a production tool and a distribution tool in the same little box – and it was not even that expensive."

Tellus was always a convivial enterprise. It represented its community, through sound. “We were drawing from the downtown Lower East Side community of musicians, visual artists, radio people, and theatre people,” Nechvatal says of the contributors to the audio arts magazine. “We knew most of these people pretty much personally – or at least socially. People used to love to participate in little magazines, print magazines…” But at the beginning of the 1980s, that community was on the brink of tragedy. “I had a very good friend – who actually was a lover – and she died of Aids, quite abruptly, quite quickly, and quite early in the Aids epidemic,” Nechvatal recalls. “It was from sharing needles. That’s what happened. And I pretty much assumed that I was going to be carrying the virus.”

Nechvatal’s concerns would ultimately prove unfounded. He was one of the lucky ones. But processing and reflecting on the scare would lead to another major shift in the artist’s concerns. In 1991, he accepted a residency at the Atelier Louis Pasteur in Arbois, France. At the former home of the famous virologist, Nechvatal embarked on a longterm project investigating computer viruses as an artistic medium. “I had this idea to face the Aids fear and trepidation,” he tells me, “to try and turn it into something… *lovely*, actually. I wanted to make something beautiful out of this horrible and possibly life-ending situation that I thought I was in.”

To the body, a virus is a glitch. It’s noise in the system. In a sense, it’s noise that links everything that Nechvatal has worked on, from his first sound collages to his full-blown Viral Symphony and even in his visual art. “That is the through-line,” he grants. “The art of noise.”

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